Claire McHugh

Axonista

From a young age, Claire McHugh's interests included art, music and languages. She studied music performance and production initially and then went on to study communications, but didn't feel suited to this course so made the decision to leave, entering the workforce earlier than she expected. *"I took on management support roles and got the chance to work in a few of Ireland's top digital agencies in the late '90s and early 2000s. I learned so much from really talented people about how a technology business works. I enjoyed project management so I decided to study part time in Dublin Business School."*

Working in operational roles in digital media companies, Ebeon and Nebula Technologies gave Claire a very broad understanding of how a company could grow. In 2003, she joined Setanta Media as Project Manager and was part of the team that worked on setting up and running the Irish and UK TV channels. Claire became Setanta's Programme Manager in 2005 and for the next five years was responsible for putting together the Irish programme schedule. "Setanta *had assembled a talented management team from RTÉ and other broadcasters, and I learned a lot from them about the TV industry. As TV, online and mobile began to converge, setting up Axonista in 2010 was a natural progression for me."*

The idea for Axonista was triggered by a conversation between Claire and co-founder Daragh Ward. Daragh had set up two service companies previously (including Nebula), but wanted to develop a software product. Claire spotted a niche for an online platform that could transform television in the online and mobile space. 6 years on, they have built a software product that solves the complex technical problems in bringing interactivity to TV and have won clients including TV3, QVC, MTV and AOL.

Claire participated in the Enterprise Ireland's Propel programme to develop the concept into a start-up business and became a High Potential Start-up the following year. *"We took on business advisors and investors that were carefully selected to suit our business. We wanted them to buy into our vision and also fill any gaps in our own capabilities."*

In 2013, Claire took part on the 5th cycle of Going for Growth. She found it to be "a *wonderful supportive community, great for discussing and resolving issues that the group were going through."*

Hoping to encourage more young women into business and technology roles, Claire often speaks on tech panels, conferences and start-up community events. *"I'm hugely encouraged by the high ratio of female entrepreneurs I get to work with as part of my role as a mentor for the Techstars Startup Next Ireland pre-accelerator. I've been there,* made the mistakes and I hope to help others avoid making the same ones."

Axonista started to grow quite quickly. Over the following years, the team grew from five staff to twenty. As more and more US clients are won, Claire expects to open an international office there. *"The challenge for us is to keep the key elements of what makes Axonista great and elevate it to something spectacular. What works in a start-up environment doesn't necessarily translate to a larger company; you have to make some changes as you grow. Where you bootstrapped before, you might now need to spend, so it's a challenge to get that balance right."*

Today, Axonista are leading the television revolution with more and more people watching TV on touchscreen and interactive devices. Claire enjoys working with her team and clients who are focused on innovating at the cutting-edge in the industry. *"We have a super team of hardworking, smart and creative people who work really well together and pull out all the stops to go the extra mile. We do our best to give them the environment they need to thrive. Sometimes, that's providing opportunities to work on radical TV apps that will be internationally recognised and sometimes it's just shooting the breeze over a few beers together."*

In 5 years' time, Claire expects Axonista will continue to scale. Establishing a viable company and adding substantial value, Claire wants to build a legacy and make a lasting impact in the TV industry.